

Coma Man

by Brooks Kohler

Nobody understands when it all falls apart. I learned this when I received the call about Gerard. It was early morning in Boston. I was seated at the kitchen table. Before me my oatmeal was cooling in a thick ceramic bowl along with coffee in a favorite fat mug. Dina, loving wife of twenty-four years, staggered into the kitchen fighting a yawn and already complaining about another day of dealing with academic bureaucracy, but none of it mattered. I just sat numb in my chair and staring at breakfast.

“Something wrong, Calvin?” asked Dina.

She had noticed the cellphone resting in my palm.

“Gerard’s dead,” I replied, cold and sterile. “He killed himself last night. I need to go to Nashville as soon as possible. The funeral is Saturday.”

With the news of Gerard trailing me, I entered through the doors of the history department and made my sorrowful way down a hallway lined with doors and filled with the faint sound of National Public Radio commentary. I arrived where I should be and inserted my key.

A university has an institutionalizing effect akin to an insane asylum. I no longer view the educated world as a place of learning but as a place of keeping. The only time I truly feel at peace is in my office whilst seated behind my gold, grain desk, and though they might not express it, I am certain my sentiments are shared by my colleagues. We are all in the prime years of life, Dina, myself, and our privileged friends. Retirement and celebratory toasts are waiting for us along with sandy beaches and the occasional honorable mention in the alumni mailer.

Before I turned on my computer, there was a tap at the door, and the familiar wafting of rose petal perfume leached out and tickled my nose. I looked and saw Rhonda, the department secretary. She had been doing her daily routine of going door to door to deliver interoffice mail and collegiate gossip. Disgruntled academics are a norm, and complaining moves like a fever from department to department. Rhonda is a carrier of this bitter mood but never a nuisance. In fact, I doubt any of us would have a job if it were not for her. Rhonda is

the female incarnate of the Great and Power Oz; for anything we cannot figure out, we go to her, and she fixes the problem. If anything makes me believe in God it is that Rhonda has no education above high school, yet she tends to the wounds of us angels of the ivory tower.

Gerard was in my thoughts and would not leave. The entire morning I moped around in some strange sort of funk. Finally at noon, whilst seated in the cafeteria, instead of listening to the same tired drivel that usually poured out of my colleagues' mouths, I raised my eyes from a cooling bowl of overpriced bean soup and asked, "Did anyone besides me and the devil hear about Gerard?"

The dumb, ignorant, shallow looks that fell on me were beyond contempt. I could have remained quiet and listened to Barnes brag about yet another paper he had submitted to the annual European conference in Memphis, an essay written from the rehashing of reinterpreted scholars who would no doubt be accepted and boost his vita, but I had to speak up and give credit to a man we had all worked

with.

Each eye chastised me severely and Barnes broke with, “We did, and we’re sorry.”

After leaving Maryland some ten years earlier to teach film history in Nashville, Tennessee, Gerard’s life remained anything but pleasant. It soon became apparent that his Yankee blood was not suited for the stifling heat of the south, making him a perpetual grouch to anybody or anything that got in his way. When it was learned that his wife Eleanor had less than a few months to live, Gerard decided to blame the humidity instead of his gift of second-hand smoke he had offered to every person who ever came into contact with him.

Dismissing the surgeon general seemed to make sense for all those in denial, including myself. After all, Gerard and Eleanor had moved to a city that had killed many hillbilly dreams, but Dina assured me that Eleanor’s demise had nothing to do with comfort and everything to do with Gerard’s incessant need to chain-smoke in true Noir fashion, and looking back, I now believe she is right.

Eleanor had lung cancer but had never

smoked. Nobody, for what I know, had seen the woman enjoy any vice unless it came attached to a page in a novel and gave her choices that fell somewhere between Charlotte Bronte and Nicholas Sparks. Those vices required more than imagination; they required a miracle.

She was, by all standards, the prude queen with the rude king, a member of the court who walked into a room as collected as a kitten and as silent as a breeze. Hardly a word came from her lips that did not sound lifted from a much too bragged about classic. Her mood was simple, consistent, and boring.

Eleanor was pampered. She did not work nor want. With Gerard's status and security, she simply had to adopt the life of a clam and exist. Gerard would provide the current. She would provide the company. Her life consisted of front porch wicker chairs and dirty knees from flower gardens. A bad day for Eleanor was not being able to get the Keurig to adjust to the proper cup. In some ways, one could argue, though it be unkind, that Eleanor was no more than a parasite that fed off Gerard's money

so she too could enjoy the semblance of life.

With the help of Rhonda and the aid of graduate students who are more than willing to climb Everest for a career beyond low paying adjunct, I kissed Dina and left Boston on Friday before the funeral.

When I landed in Nashville, it was my luck that it was raining. As I stepped out to catch a cab, I thought, “Gerard would love this. It would remind him of a transition in a 1950s soap box thriller, the kind of transition that was so predictable one would pound his fists and demand a refund, metaphorically a refund on life.”

Despite the rain, Music City was warm and muggy. Within a few hours I could understand why Gerard despised it. Aside from the ungodly hum of traffic and the monotonous waves of tourists that arrived on pilgrimages to gawk and stumble from bar to bar on weekend vacations, the air had a smell akin to mud mixed with vinegar, disturbing the appetite and doing little to promote the romantic idea of southern adventure.

From my hotel window on West End, it

vividly occurred to me that Gerard was the kind of man who wanted to be personal friends with Al Capone and have drinks with F. Scott. As a character, I could picture Gerard strolling the sidewalks of vintage Manhattan in a suit, pressing conventions with his flowered wisdom, and walking hand-in-hand with the Green Fairy while flicking a cigarette cherry.

When they banned smoking on our campus such a man became known. This was the protesting 1990s when students first began to flex their intellectual legs around modern inconvenience, one of which was not smoking. However, at the time, our Boston university had an authoritarian dean who loathed cigarettes and had even harsher view for attractive coeds who wore ripped jeans and vanity sunglasses while they comingled under trees to enjoy a liberating Parisian experience.

Gerard was told very bluntly, at a faculty meeting called by the administration that, “To make everyone happy, smoking will be banned at the start of the spring semester. So, I recommend those of you who enjoy smoking will learn to do it off

campus or in your imagination. Defiance will result in severe repercussions. Of course, if you choose to quit, we'll help you."

The announcement enraged Gerard. He stood, shook his fists, and stormed out of the room, mouthing something about fascism and Orwell's nightmare while fingering a loose cigarette from a crumpled, tin foil pack of discount smokes.

Of course, Gerard had tenure and more than enough money to afford good cigarettes, but he was born with a rebel spirit that made him walk a fine edge between civility and anarchy.

Because he was protected by contract, he could spit in the Dean's face and yell the punch, and nobody could touch him. In the world of academia, Gerard was a made guy. But, a darling he was not. He was a holdover critic and an anti-establishment figure that only the angels of the tower could love. Students feared his classes, and he was proud to hand out career ruining grades to those who thought the front row would bring them favor. In fact, Gerard took great pride in dashing the hopes of a young person on the rocks, like a

ship trying to dock during a storm.

“Read this,” he said to a student who had arrived at his office, upset over a grade. Gerard reached to a shelf and gave the student his personal copy of *The Beautiful and Damned*, making sure to point out the chapter in which the prideful Anthony Patch gets tossed to the street. That was the kind of man he was. It took little to make him ready to shred someone, and when he reached that peak, you were about to witness something stunning. Gerard was a master at pen to paper brutality. He took the stories in those ancient fiction novels he so adored to heart and used their morals as bullets from his teacher’s pulpit.

After touching base with Dina, I took a short nap followed by a long, soothing shower. Part of the funeral involved a celebratory meeting with others at *The Palm*. So, once refreshed and having snacked on a sample platter sent to my room, the next step was calling a cab to drive me downtown.

Since Gerard had moved to Tennessee, our visits had been sporadic. Oddly enough, I had never met any of his compatriots.

Either out of contempt or shame, Gerard kept school and friends off-limits. He did the same in Boston, making him something of a sought after recluse. As one visiting professor said, “He’s got that Kant thing going on,” and I had to agree. Gerard, being the movie scholar he was, understood how to make people interested in a shadow. By staying out of the self-promoting limelight of academia, he did, as a consequence, create a fan base that overlooked his rough, arrogant demeanor that bordered on bully and correcting father.

The thing that Gerard learned was that sometimes the harder you make your students work, the more you are respected.

For an academic wanting nothing but praise, it is a damaging trade-off, especially when one considers schools love edutainers. I myself have seen associate professors who were young, attractive, and a easygoing, human versions of a Ken Doll failing to get tenure simply because of a lackadaisical approach that kept them from being labeled as pricks.

It was common knowledge that Gerard

seldom gave A's.

He preferred C's based on his belief that nobody was perfect. In fact, he had a sign on the wall that read, "You earn the grade you work for. How hard are you willing to work so I can watch you cry?" This direct approach frightened off the weak but ensured his classes would have the brightest minds. "I can't take a lot," he once said, "and I loathe asking questions to get back that stupid look."

In the end, if you saw a student attending one of Gerard's senior seminars, you were not just looking at a kid deep in debt. You were looking at a masochist.

At *The Palm*, I found myself surrounded by a group of male braggers, and each so sure of himself. Had Gerard walked into the bar to fetch a drink, none of them would have questioned their sanity upon seeing a corpse order a Whiskey Daisy.

Absent too was the presence of any females which seemed true-to-fit, given that Gerard attracted wasps, not bees, and I realized in understanding this that I was lumping myself into

the heap of sugar. Each man in attendance for the send-off toast seemed to be his own character in what had to be a Gerardian Play.

Riggs could have been named Red, if not for lack of creativity, for nothing else than blunt description. He was a tall, red faced-man with broad shoulders and sledge hammer hands. His hair was a cross between apricot merged with orange, and he sweated profusely, causing his button up shirt and thick hair to appear greasy.

When he smiled, long wrinkles formed around his eyes making him appear wiser than maybe he was. And, all of it, the antiquated look, his booming voice, and propensity to angle a conversation to suit his needs worked well to compliment his occupation as a geography instructor.

The moment we met he laughed loudly, until breaking into a cough followed by a forced down shot of Scotch to clear his throat. He was a man made for an Irish tavern, and I figured upon inspection he had made the rounds, not once but several times.

Gerard must have hated and loved Riggs with a unholy passion. Gerard was a fighter of words, and Riggs was a complexity that would have kept him busy.

Johnson, on the other hand, had somehow slipped past the gate and had done so for no clear or rational reason other than wanting to see what was on the other side. He was short, chubby, and the kind of man I pictured Piggy from *Lord of the Flies* would have become had not a rock smashed him in the head.

From the start I found the runt to be a standoffish, quiet prototype of the stereotypical geek. His hair was dark and combed to the side, his eyes were magnified behind thick-framed glasses.

Johnson was no doubt one of those who went into teaching because he felt inadequate to do anything else in life. It took no degree in psychology to realize he suffered from an acute inferiority complex that he tried to overcome with printed accolades, but I did have to postulate why he would be attracted to Gerard, a man who had little patience for people, let alone those who lacked

confidence.

Coolidge approached every conversation with an air of silence and followed up a question with a soft-spoken, cool tone. He taught literature, and his love of poetry and prose made him the kind of person who could remain somber in a rush to escape a burning building. To introduce himself, he stood off to the side of a conversation I was having with Riggs at the bar, and he coughed gently until I acknowledged his presence.

When I turned, Riggs shouted, "I'll have another, and whatever he wants, I'm buyin'!"

I tried to excuse the offer, but Riggs had the look of a man so determined to see another drink, and he might kill them just for the opportunity. So, I ordered a Jack and Coke while Riggs took on another Scotch.

Our glasses in hand, we toasted Gerard and tossed back a shot. Riggs licked his lips and asked, "How long are you in town?"

"Until it's over."

My reply made him laugh, and he gave me a firm comrade hug with one arm. His grip on me

was so tight I felt bones shift. I was convinced, right at that moment, that in a previous life Riggs had been a Viking or some rough character with brute force.

The night winded down, and I returned to the hotel on West End. As I was entering the room, my cellphone rang. It was Riggs. I had forgotten we exchanged numbers. He was spitting out some gargled speech that was undecipherable before the phone went silent.

It had all been too much excitement for one day, and I proceeded to the bed where I removed my jacket, tie, and loosened my collar. With Dina on my mind, I called home and checked in.

She was still up, but sleepy. Her entire day had been spent going over some proposal for the university. As I listened to her talk, I thought back about how happy she was when she landed the job working in administration and how we both thought it would be a good fit and ensure me nepotistic tenure. But as she talked and I listened, I could tell our naïve bliss had played out, and we were both at that point of knowing a salesman

behind a curtain controls the Wizard.

At some point during the middle of the night, I heard a sound. I opened my eyes and stared at the ceiling. For a moment I thought I was dreaming, but the sound came again, and this time I realized it was coming from the door.

Rising, I turned on the lamp, reached for a shirt, and stumbled to the peephole. I peered out and saw the face of a beautiful young woman with long brown hair who looked to be in her early thirties.

I peered over my shoulder and caught a glimpse of the time on the digital clock. It was definitely too late for a chance meeting.

Either she was mistaken on the room, or she was intentionally at my door.

“Who are you?” I asked, unlocking but keeping the door secure.

“Are you Calvin?”

She introduced herself as Melody, and, shockingly, the offspring of Gerard.

Opening the door I found an angel of a girl wearing an unbuttoned raincoat and beneath the

coat was a professional suit.

Hanging from her right shoulder was a lawyer's satchel.

Stepping back, I allowed her in and let her know immediately that I was sorry for her loss and that I had no idea she existed. To this she simply smiled and took a seat in one of the comfy chairs situated in the corner and at that time she reminded me of her father's desire to keep things secret, including children.

Reckless and confused, I asked bluntly if she was the only child, and she confirmed she was.

It was so strange to think that Gerard had a daughter, especially one so ladylike, given he was so rough around the edges.

I sat down on the bed, stared at her, and she stared at me as though she was an investigator who had just discovered the person she was tailing.

Without much words, she opened her satchel and pulled out a yellow envelope that was well-used. She said, "I'm handling my father's affairs. This belonged to him, and he wanted you to have it. It is a manuscript."

Handing over the envelope I took it into my unsure hands and stared down at it. A life's work in one yellow package, I thought.

"Your father meant a lot to me," I commented.

"You're the first, outside the family," said Melody. "Most thought he was a cold, heartless prick." She stood up quickly. "Well, it's been nice meeting you, Calvin. My phone number is on the back of the manuscript."

Walking up to me, she reached out to shake my hand. An awkward moment followed as her wrist dangled before me like a limp rod. Mentally, I questioned her quick departure, and it occurred to me that, outside of handling the affairs of Gerard's estate, Melody was not, if ever, part of his complicated life. So, I placated by taking her hand in friendship, from the bed, and escorted her to the door.

Once Melody had left the room, I latched the door behind me and returned to the bed where I sat down and carefully pulled out a few hundred pages of single-spaced, knuckle-busted text with the odd but amusing title, *Coma Man*.

Just as dawn was peeking over the Cumberland, I was six cups of coffee and seventy-five pages into what I can only describe as an educated rant by a very clever person.

Coma Man was not easy reading. Gerard had a tendency to perfume prose with flowery words, and Courier Font was buggy, but the story was amusing, well-written, and a condemning commentary on contemporary life. The story centered around a twenty-five-year-old man who had the unfortunate happening of slipping into a coma during the Reagan administration and the dismal luxury of awakening during the Great Recession of 2008.

Feeling dejected and disconnected from a world that had gone from cold war politics to liberal patsy, nothing for this man made any sense. Gerard described his life as being "...a continuous state of getting screwed by digitized redundancy," and it was obvious that Gerard was the man in the story, a man who still pecked out pages on a typewriter and had been, for all intent and purposes, at the mercy of those around him who disappointed by their inaction to facilitate a positive

change.

High on caffeine and clever rebuttals to contemporary life, I put aside the manuscript and stood. Once on my feet, I walked to the window, pulled back the curtain, and noticed the rain had stopped, and revealing a cityscape of grey shades and illuminated sandstone made more rich due to colorful tones of clinging moisture glistening in the spreading light of a Saturday dawn.

From the sanctity of my perch, I peered down on the busy street of West End Avenue where I saw the daily routine of Nashville unfolding as cars raced toward Metro and the Four-Forty Expressway.

It would be a few hours until the funeral, but a sinking feeling came over me. Stepping away from the window, I returned to the bed and plopped down. With my eyes pooling with tears, I turned to the manuscript and picked it up. I held it in my trembling hand and whispered to the shadows, “I know why you did it, but I wish you hadn’t.”

By high noon the sun was bright, but the air was thick with humidity. I stepped out of the hotel

to hail a cab, and without any effort, broke into a sloppy sweat. The cab arrived, only a minute or two after I emerged from the lobby. I lunged to the door, opened it on my own volition, and dove into the back seat to escape the suffocating heat.

Gerard had insisted on a closed casket funeral. At the cemetery, I found a small gathering that included the familiar faces from the night before; Johnson, Coolidge, and Riggs, the last of which looked so uncomfortable in his suit I knew he, himself, was clinging to life as he tried to fight a hangover.

We took our turn at staring at the picture of Gerard displayed in the silver frame the mortician had properly placed with fat, drooping flowers. Oddly, Gerard had what appeared to be a mocking expression. I tilted my head sideways, to achieve a different perspective, and asked, "Does anyone else think he is grinning?"

"It looks like a smirk," said Johnson.

"Smirk? No, that's a grin," said Riggs, fighting back the urge to vomit. "He's happy he's finished with all this."

Riggs waved his hand around, and in the processing of following his finger trace an arch, I turned and studied the cemetery grounds.

Missing from the scene was Gerard's daughter, Melody. I scanned the stones, but she was nowhere. Riggs noticed my study and inquired what I was doing. I dismissed his questioning diplomatically, but not satisfied, he asked if I would be up for a departing drink. I excused the offer by explaining I was planning to catch an early flight, but Riggs was adamant that I share one last drink before leaving what he cleverly referred to as "Nashvegas."

Riggs rode back with me to my hotel. He watched me pack, and while doing so, he poured us two glasses of Kentucky bourbon from a plastic bottle.

"I don't like expensive booze," he said, handing me my glass. "Sure, I'll drink it when I'm out with the boys, but a man who drinks does so to get drunk and healed, not show off."

"I do neither," I said, sniffing the glass and setting it down.

Riggs sat down on the bed.

“It’s rude, Calvin, not to have a drink when a man pours one for you. Didn’t your father teach you manners?”

“Is that a southern expression?” I asked, folding a tie. “Where I come from, children don’t drink.”

“It’s world-wide,” replied Riggs. “Now drink your cheap liquor.”

He was fierce and demanding, a bully drunkard, but I took a sip to satisfy him, and he eased back.

It was while relaxing and pondering when Riggs noticed Gerard’s manuscript. He picked it up and started thumbing through it, but when he questioned where I had gotten it, I snatched it from his clammy hands.

Riggs lay back on the bed and laughed himself into a cough.

“No need to lie. I’ve seen it.”

“His daughter gave it to me,” I said.

“Melody?” questioned Riggs. “She was here?”

Had I said too much? I figured maybe, but

Riggs knew her name so I interrogated him about her. I found out Melody lived in Franklin, a small but wealthy community south of Nashville, but she had nothing to do with her father. According to Riggs, who was surprised I never knew of her existence, she was the reason Gerard had moved to Nashville in the first place.

“But wasn’t it teaching?” I asked.

Riggs laughed loudly and reminded me who I was dealing.

“Any man,” he said, “who would write a story like this is capable of anything.”

It made me pause. Riggs may have been right. Gerard was different, but not sharing he had a daughter with me was startling.

“It’s good, isn’t it?” questioned Riggs.

“It’s okay,” I replied.

“It’s fantastic!” he proclaimed. “A bit of sedition in a world so complacent with formality.”

He was becoming drunk and on the verge of belligerence.

So, I took the manuscript, placed it in the envelope, finished packing, and rushed him from

the room.

Once back home and settled into my teaching routine, I decided to call a friend in New York who worked for an academic publisher, and from this conversation I was put in touch with an agent who specialized in books of “significant importance.”

After a week of courting via email, I was asked to mail the manuscript to an address in Boston where a beta reader would give it a test read. I did as instructed, and three weeks later I received a phone call from a man named Wayne who said he was interested in the story, but wanted a friend he trusted to give it a second read before he made his final decision.

What followed was two months of my waiting patiently.

Finally, on a Thursday afternoon, while grading essays, I received a phone call from Wayne who said, “Calvin, I want to publish it, but there’s a problem. It has no ending.”

I recommended we let the ending remain a mystery, but Wayne insisted one be written. “It’s not the 1920s anymore,” he said. “People don’t buy

cliffhangers.”

Dismayed, my wife Dina suggested I write the ending myself, but as much as I thought it was a great idea, not to mention potential bragging rights, I knew I could never match the bitter disdain that Gerard shared for what he referred to as the “pro-authority” twenty-first century, nor could I ask anybody I taught with to reach so deep. One had to be in a special frame of mind to write the rant that Gerard was tossing down, and having a healthy pension and retirement in wait tends to make a person content.

Besides, even if I could convince someone in the history department to work on the manuscript, death would spare Gerard no mercy. He was despised, a rolling joke of a professor whose name was seldom mentioned without a growl, and the last thing I wanted to see was some well-written introduction that would take a hammer and chisel to his stone soul.

“No!” I declared, to Dina. “I’m not going to let them tear him to shreds before it’s published!”

“So after is okay?” she asked.

In desperation, I reached out and called Riggs, but he suggested the most curious thing. He asked me to contact Melody and then call him.

So, doing as suggested, I called the number on the manuscript, and when Melody answered she politely asked, “What do you want?”

My timing was uncanny. She had been fighting with someone in her life, and I had placed the call only minutes after a doozy of shouting match.

After stammering over a long-winded greeting that should have been only a few seconds, had I not been alarmed by her answering the phone in such a harsh mood, I said, “It’s about your father’s story. I need some help.”

Upon hearing this, there was a cute sigh and short pause that ended with, “I’m sorry, Calvin, but I’m at my wit’s end at the moment. Could you call back?”

“I want to publish your father’s story,” I blurted, “and Riggs suggested I call, and, well, you provided your phone number. So, this is why I

called.”

“Are you concluding,” she questioned, becoming angry in tone, “that because I gave you my number I might want something to do with that idiotic story?”

“The thought had crossed my mind,” I said, recoiling.

It had to sound strange to her. Melody was a mystery to me, but I was something of a shadow of her father, a voice from not beyond the grave but in close proximity. She was slow to comment further, taking it all in, but when she did speak she informed me that she wanted nothing to do with the project or her pathetic, worthless father whom she described as a demon toy maker who had treated her as little more than a poorly stuffed doll. Quite bluntly, for all Melody cared, I could do with the book whatever I pleased, even if it meant using it for kindling to start a fire to roast marshmallows.

All of it, however, I found hard to believe. Why would a person, especially one with a bitter disdain for the author, go out of her way to hand deliver the manuscript if she did not care about it?

The question rattled about in my brain until I presented it to Dina who gave me the cold shallow response of, “You don’t even know this girl, Calvin. Stop pretending you do.”

A few days later I was sealed up in my office, deep into a complimentary, soon-to-be, overpriced textbook on the industrial revolution when a tap from the hallway startled me. Rising from my desk, I opened the door where I discovered sweet smelling Rhonda and beside her a short, pudgy man with a mustache and glasses.

He was wearing a green dress coat that looked as if it had been pilfered from a box of discards. With a big grin, he reached out to shake my hand.

“Sorry to visit this way, Professor,” he said. “I’m Wayne from New York.”

“Yes, yes,” I muttered, taking his hand. “So much for privacy,” I continued, sarcastically, inviting him into my office.

Wayne had been a complete secret to everyone except Dina, but now Rhonda knew of him which meant everyone else in the history department would, too, given her propensity to

overshare.

Bordering upset, I peered out my office door to see if spies were lingering about, and not seeing anyone, I played it cool.

“Shall I bring some coffee, Calvin?” asked Rhonda.

I focused my eyes on her kind, sweet face.

“Bring whiskey,” I replied, but my snap brought a distressed look from both Rhonda and Wayne, causing me to quickly correct my wit as a joke by adding, “No, but thank you, Rhonda. We’ll be leaving. If I have a call, please take a message.”

Over java at a nearby coffeehouse, I learned that Wayne enjoyed making impromptu visits to new authors, and though technically I was not the author, I was the representative of Gerard’s book, and so I informed Wayne of Gerard’s daughter.

Upon my revealment, Wayne insisted on knowing her name to which I replied, “I can’t do that because of privacy issues.”

And Wayne replied very legally, “If we publish, we’ll need her to sign off, or she can sue.”

We went back and forth on this issue until I

finally broke down and admitted I knew nothing about her except that she and Gerard did not get along and she wanted nothing to do with the project. Thinking my appeal to empathy would work, I soon learned I was wrong. Wayne too saw a flaw in the logic.

“Why would someone with so much hate in her heart be so kind to hand over a sacred artifact of the hate itself?” he asked.

Still, I insisted Wayne respect Melody’s privacy, but he was adamant on speaking with her to clear up any misunderstandings that could exist. So, after coffee, I reluctantly drove him to my house and there we made a fateful call to Nashville.

As I predicted, Melody was furious.

“Call here again,” she shouted, “and I’ll have you arrested.”

No sooner did she hang up than Wayne called her on his cellphone. Again, legal action was threatened if I we continued to interrogate her about her father’s story, but Wayne needed an answer.

“Are you relinquishing rights?” he asked.

“Yes,” replied Melody.

With the call finished, Wayne begged me for a victory drink of brandy to which I obliged, but not without first pointing out how coldly he was acting toward Melody. He replied, “Calvin, loosen up. This is the publishing business. All we’re requesting is permission on a book that I’m sure will make it on the Time’s.”

Pleased to think my endorsement could be on a book in such high rank as the likes of Ambrose and King, I backed away and forgot about Wayne’s cold, calculating ways.

After two glasses and courage, I blurted out, “I want to finish it, Wayne.”

“Finish what? Mowing your lawn? Please tell me, Calvin, you’re not talking about *Coma Man*.”

“I certainly am.”

Wayne glared at me for a few seconds before diplomatically clearing his throat.

“Great. I’m game. Show me some of your work.”

He asked me for samples of my fiction so he could see if I had the right stuff for the job, but not

having anything aside from scholarly works for display, I shied away from it.

“Look, Calvin,” he said, pleading with me to be rational.

“You might be able to write an essay for a journal, and that’s commendable, but there’s a huge difference in writing for an academic audience and one that stockpiles weapons in the family bunker. I know someone who can do this if you can’t find someone.”

He grinned.

I frowned.

And, that was that.

In the evening, after Wayne had left to catch a flight back to New York, I called Riggs and boldly asked if he would be willing to write the ending to *Coma Man*. He laughed wildly into the phone and replied, “No!”

Riggs reminded me he was not a writer but instead a scientist. He also added he drank too much to keep a coherent thought that was not scrawled onto his *tabula rasa*, otherwise known as his academic brain.

“Frankly, I’m shocked you asked,” said Riggs. “A man of your educational background shouldn’t be so stupid as to waste his time calling up people who have no idea on how to go about writing a novel. You represent everything that is wrong with this country.”

“And that blunt attitude is exactly why I need you, Riggs.

Aside from Gerard, you’re the most outspoken, offensive person I know.”

“Can’t your agent help you?” he questioned.

I explained to Riggs that Wayne had offered to find a writer, but I wanted to impress him by going it alone. Riggs found this appalling and scolded me with his belligerent temper.

“You’re acting like a freshman, Calvin,” said Riggs. “You’re a filthy, lying freshman who has faked his way through A’s because he’s too proud to fail too and stupid to learn.”

“Riggs?” I asked.

“Yeah.”

“Are you sober?”

“Nope.”

Unable to entice Riggs, I slipped back into my mind and thought about whom I could call for help. Dina was as perplexed as I, but she was a calm, cool, and collected woman who only exploded between the hours of 9 a.m. and 5 p.m. After that, she put her business tension on hold. When she found me at the kitchen table at 11:30 p.m., going through a shoe box filled with business cards, her first move was to rub my neck. Her next was to lean down and whisper, "Time for bed."

The next day I marched to my office with *Coma Man* jammed into my shoulder strapped satchel, biting back the two cents I planned to give Wayne, once I got him on the line. What ensued was a shouting match in which Wayne argued I was becoming obsessed and hinted that I might need mental help.

Barnes, who shared a room close to mine, heard the my voice raised in a piercing pitch and tapped on the door. I waved him on, but he insisted and opened it.

"You do realize we are all trying to work?"

"You do realize I'm on the phone!" I replied,

sharply.

“Yes, and so does the rest of the department. Keep your voice down. We have students.”

I looked sternly at him and he backed away, closing the door as he did. The brief pause had allowed Wayne the chance to refresh his thoughts, and I had the opportunity to catch my breath. In no unobvious way he explained to me that he had talked to a publisher about the book and there was interest in the idea, especially since so many people were skeptical of technological bliss caused by growing fear of surveillance.

“It could be a new Orwellian slant,” said Wayne. “There’s a lot of people tired of all this technology. Let’s just hope they read eBooks.”

Taken aback, I sat down in my chair and relaxed.

“Really? Are people saying that?”

“That’s what I think,” he continued. “Look, Calvin. There’s interest on my end for a distribution deal into Europe, Britain especially, and I’d like you to write a foreword, given your close connection to Gerard, but *Coma Man* needs to be finished, and by

someone who knows how to write intellectually malcontent fiction.”

“You have anybody in mind?” I asked.

“Yes, but they’re all doing time in federal prison.”

“Are you joking? I can never tell.”

“Look. Let’s not play games here,” Wayne said. “We’ve wasted enough time already. We need to find someone who is paranoid, but sane.”

A tap at the door startled me. Thinking it was Barnes again, I dropped my forehead to the table and shouted, “I’m on the phone!”

“Calvin?” a sweet voice replied through a crack in the door.

I looked up to see Rhonda peering through. “It’s good.”

“What’s good?”

She entered and handed me a copy of Gerard’s manuscript.

“I hope you don’t get mad, I made a copy for myself.”

Surprise flooded my eyes, and I asked, “How did you do this?”

“When you asked me to make a copy, I made one to take home.”

“This is intellectual property!”

“Calvin? Calvin?” Wayne’s voice blared from out of the phone.

“Yes, I’m here, Wayne. I’ll call you back. I need to get to something.”

Stunned, I ended the call and began to thumb the pages where Rhonda had made notes in red pen. I offered her a chair, and she sat down.

Taking several minutes, I turned page after page before arriving at the last where I noticed Rhonda had sketched together some logical path for an ending. It was good, really good. Whereas I would have envisioned *Coma Man* going on some 24-hour news programming ranting about needed change, Rhonda simply had him vanish by one day taking off, never to be seen or heard from again. The ending was simple, but it worked, and I figured that leaving the story opened-ended was much like Gerard had lived.

Placing the manuscript on my desk, I collected my thoughts and then looked at her. She

had a doped look on her face, no doubt waiting for the worse, but I grinned, and she reciprocated.

Wayne wanted to see a finished draft by Christmas. He was adamant that Rhonda submit the ending before the university went on New Year's break. Apparently the publishing business that Wayne was tapped into shared the same schedule as universities, but when it came to my students and Rhonda's responsibility, he would have to wait.

In the end, we reached February before a draft was suitable for sending, and Wayne took no time replying with a very terse message: "The ending can be better. You have two weeks to make it work."

When I showed his recommendations to Rhonda, she slumped back into her chair and said, "He's killing me, Calvin."

"Think of the money," I said. "You're gonna get a good chunk when it's finished."

Rhonda stared back at me from behind her desk and then cunningly inquired about an advance. I was shocked at her manipulative behavior, but when she demanded an advance

before finishing the ending, I found myself back at my office and on the phone with Wayne.

Again, he and I was engaged in a long distance shouting match which brought the entire department to my door, along with grad students who found the scene amusing. When I looked up and realized everyone was watching me, I waved them on, and they dispersed, everyone except Barnes who seemed determined to make my life a living nightmare.

Pressing mute on the phone, I asked, “What do you want?”

“I want to help.”

“And how do you propose to do that?”

“By writing.”

“Can you write fiction other than what you present at conferences.”

Barnes smirked and entered my office. Explaining to Wayne I would call him back, Barnes took a seat and revealed something to me that I never thought was possible. Humbly he admitted his paper, the one submitted to the European conference, had been rejected on the grounds that

it was deemed *boring*.

“I haven’t told anyone,” said Barnes.

“You’ve told me,” I replied. “Don’t I count?”

He chuckled and leaned in. “Let me help finish *Coma Man*.”

Later that night, from the comfort of my chair in my modest den, I broke the news about Barnes to Wayne. After the news about Rhonda, he was more angry than a nest of yellow jackets that had been mowed over.

“How many people are you going to get involved, Calvin?”

Should I figure on ten? Twenty. Do you have an estimate?”

Wayne talked so loud in the phone that Dina could hear his shrill voice booming from the kitchen, and when she entered the room to hand deliver me a glass of iced Scotch, she caught him saying, “This book is going to put me into a coma, if the heart attack I’m working on doesn’t get me first. I need that book!”

The call ended. I looked up at her with disdain for Wayne.

She was holding the glass.

“He’s mad,” commented Dina.

“And what would ever make you think that, my darling?”

Dina cradled a sip before handing the Scotch to me.

I slurped down a few and then relaxed into the chair. She reached out and patted me atop the head.

“I’m going to call it a night,” she said.

“And I’m going put on some Wilkerson and get drunk.”

She took a few moments to rub her fingers through my hair, commented on my winter dandruff, and let her hand glide off and onto my shoulder as she pulled away to exit the room, leaving me to achieve a moderate yet blissful buzz.

The next morning Barnes was waiting for me at my office.

“Calvin, I need this,” he said, as I unlocked the door. “I’m stuck in writer’s block and need something to fix it.”

Tired and reeling from the effects of the

Scotch, I entered my tight confines, pulled out my chair, and dropped on the leather covered cushion. I was thoroughly exhausted from drink and the book.

“It’s a story about a guy who comes out of a coma only to find the world less than appealing,” I said.

Barnes looked perplexed as if something was wrong with the story. I inquired as to what he was thinking, and he started to say something but caught himself. I figured it was because he had so many times been rejected that maybe he had learned a new trick, but I was wrong.

“Why on earth is it that?” he asked.

Floored and disgusted, I pounded my fist. Barnes jumped.

“Because that’s how Gerard felt, and that’s what he wrote!”

Barnes studied my face. We had never gotten along. He had always been the first one to criticize a new idea and the first one to promote his own. I could tell he was trying to think of something clever to weasel his way out of asking such a stupid

question, but he was stumped.

“I have work to do,” I said. “Can you leave and come back?”

Rhonda tapped the door, catching us both by surprise. She showed that wholesome expression she was campus known for.

“So, did you talk to Wayne?” she asked.

Dumbfounded amazed, her question locked me into a moronic gaze of disbelief until a switch keyed me on.

“I can’t take it,” I said, throwing my hands into the air.

“You,” said pointing to Rhonda, “can write, but you want money, and you,” I concluded, aiming my finger at Barnes, “can’t write, and you want to. I don’t know what’s more pathetic, my not understanding why Gerard took his life or my trying to figure out why I don’t take my own.”

“Calvin!” gasped Rhonda.

“Well, I’m only stating the obvious fact. Ever since this book was handed to me, it’s caused me nothing but headaches, and Gerard, well, he was not a headache. He was my friend.”

Another tap interrupted. A baldheaded man wearing chrome framed glasses poked his head into the conversation.

“Morning, Rhonda, Barnes,” he said.

“Morning, Dr. Fugit,” said Rhonda.

“Edwin,” sneered Barnes.

“Calvin,” Edwin asked, “may I have a word with you?”

Edwin Fugit was the department chair and a man who dressed like it was 1940 with the sensibilities of a 1960s republican.

If the Ivory Tower led to Mt. Olympus, Edwin was our Zeus. He was a direct, opposing force who persuaded through brash elitism and a general mood of snobbery. Next to the board of the university, Edwin was it. He boasted a beer gut grown on the finest Belgium hops and enjoyed bragging on his children who were doing quite well, despite being born with Silver Spoon-in-Mouth Syndrome.

Edwin’s impromptu visit could mean only one thing: I was in trouble.

“Now, look, Edwin,” I said, gaining the lead as

I walked with him through the hall, “she was putting pressure on me.”

“Who? Rhonda?” asked Edwin, stepping into his office and waving me in. He closed the door as I entered. “Are you going out of your mind, Calvin? Why on earth would you ask the secretary to write a book that might make it on the bestsellers’ list?

Were you seriously going to give her credit for something you should have been capable of doing yourself?”

Edwin moved to his desk and took his pontificate’s throne.

He crossed his legs and put his pointing fingers tip-to-tip as he became perplexed on a thought.

“How long do you need?” he asked.

“I figure I can finish the manuscript in a month, if I type it myself.”

“You mean if you lie and say someone else typed it. Tell me. What’s Barnes lingering about for?”

“He wants a motivational boost.”

“Yes, I would say so, after the conference

rejection.”

Edwin swiveled in his chair and zeroed in on the window that had a view of the faculty parking lot.

“We’re lucky, Calvin,” said Edwin. “We get an above average salary, a gold package retirement, and are seldom ever told we’re wrong. Students fear us. Society thinks we’re privileged, and we are.” He spun around and faced me. “In winter, it’s tight sweaters and yoga pants. In the summer, it’s shorts and flip-flops, but Gerard was not like us.” Edwin pulled out a drawer in his desk and retrieved from the cavity a copy of *Coma Man*. He placed the manuscript in front of me and tapped it with a finger. “Gerard was cynical, Calvin. He was bitter and unwilling to accept just how fortunate he really was as a professor and a man.” Edwin stood up.

“Had it not been for his threatening to sue every time it rained on his parade, he would have been tossed out to the street for the way he treated us. Finish your story, but don’t become it!”

An hour later, I was up on the fifth floor of the stacks in the university library reading *Walden* when

a soothing hand touched my shoulder. I peered up at the mesmerizing eyes of Dina.

“Henry David. How fitting,” she commented. “If you’re planning a revolution, I’m afraid you’re going to need a permit.”

“Can you help me with that?”

“Maybe I already have,” she sighed, touching my cheek.

“Everyone is mad at me.”

“You’re channeling, Gerard,” said Dina.

“You sound like Edwin.”

She grinned and took the chair next to me. Leaning her head against my shoulder, she yawned and continued with, “I’m bored with higher ed. Let’s get away for a while, a weekend trip to see what everyone else does.”

“I need to write the ending.”

Dina lifted her head. “But Wayne said, „No.’ I say, agree with Wayne.”

“What else can I do? Rhonda insists on money. Edwin wants it finished. I have no options. I need my mind back!”

“You have Barnes.”

“He’s desperate,” I said. Besides, he’d only find a way to tear Gerard to shreds. I can’t let that happen regardless of the overall opinion of him deserving thus.”

“You could pay Rhonda and ask Wayne for the money later.”

“Are you serious?”

“How much could she possibly want, Calvin?”

“Are you implying I can’t finish this?”

“Darling,” said Dina, “I married a professor who spent four years writing his doctoral thesis when it should have taken two at tops. Yes, I’m saying there is a remote chance you won’t.”

The next day I plead with Rhonda to reconsider completing the story, but she refused to work on it. Even after offering her two thousand dollars she declined. A sneaky suspicion was that, Edwin had said something to her, but I was finished with pressing the issue.

Disgusted, I called Wayne, but was sent to voicemail.

Many hours later, well into the evening when his call did come in, I knew before Wayne said a

word that he was backing out of pursuing publication on *Coma Man*.

“It’s not you, Calvin,” said Wayne. “It’s just going too slow.”

After spending months, days, and hours trying to get the manuscript to market, the project was being shelved because it was removing Wayne from more sure bets, and the moment the call ended, I felt a lonesome weight lift that caused me to break down and sob uncontrollably in the privacy of my palms.

The month of May came and passed on smoothly to June, July, and August. Warm weather greeted another graduating class, Barnes finally received bragging rights when a refined version of his lackluster paper was accepted at a conference in Memphis, and sanity returned to my life once I decided to put Gerard’s story behind me and focus on the certain future.

Then, one warm day in September, I returned home and discovered a yellow envelope sitting on the porch at the base of the front door. Reaching down, I picked up the mysterious item that had no

return address but definitely had some weight.

When Dina came home hours later she discovered me spellbound at the kitchen table.

“Calvin, everything okay?”

“*Coma Man*, Dina. It’s finished.”

Had I been put through nightmare for the sake of some sick, demented retribution? There was no way of knowing, but when I informed Wayne of the arrival of the mysterious envelope and that it contained the finalized ending to *Coma Man*, he was ecstatic and set me to the task of writing a forward, but how was I to do it? How was I to introduce a story by a man who had, for all intent and purposes, been a mystery to not only myself but all of us?

In fact, by the time I had sat down and seriously considered a way to address the book, I was a bit angry at Gerard for having been so deceptive.

It is strange to know a person most of your life only to learn in the end you knew practically nothing about him. The feeling of being cheated did leave me with a perplexing problem. How was I to do Gerard justice in light of all I knew? He had

drained me. I admired him, but I also felt disdain for him for being so cold, callous, and uncaring. As a man, Gerard had it made. His life was a mole-infested lawn, but his grass always mowed. So many people would have given a year off their life to have what Gerard had. As a professor, he enjoyed the accolades of university life, and yet he was not satisfied with any of it. He lived a miserable existence, either by choice or temperament, but he could have at least pretended to have enjoyed the parts that mattered.

In writing the forward, it occurred to me that the only way I could edit his character was to make a balance between Gerard the man and Gerard the philosopher. To do so, I mentally scanned through years of collected memories until I had mixed the bitter truth into something palatable. As a man, I did not uphold him as a saint but instead as an undiscovered sage who was held back by the very thing that gave him his status, the Ivory Tower. I even titled the intro “Spitting from the Lookout,” as I knew an expletive would be less offensive, despite being more appropriate.

When the book was finally released six months later, it gained attention fast. Being naïve enough to think much had changed, I felt Gerard was deserving of a spot on the university wall that commemorated notable persons who had graced the campus by leaning on pulpits. However, when I asked to have my friend considered for the honor, the request was denied because the board felt Gerard had not contributed anything substantial to the university's overall intellectual development.

And, for Melody, I tried one last time to make contact to let her know I was going to be in Nashville to accept an award for her father's book. She declined my offer to meet with parting words that brought forth instant sobriety, "How sad it is to create a life so easily forgotten."

THE END

"Coma Man" written by Brooks Kohler in 2016.

This story is fiction. Similarities to any person living or deceased are a coincidence.

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